DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 368 785 TM 021 298

AUTHOR Kurtz, Linda
TITLE Teacher Assessments of Coping Styles in Children of Divorce.
PUB DATE Apr 94
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New Orleans, LA, April 4-8, 1994).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adjustment (to Environment); *Behavior Problems; Comparative Analysis; *Coping; *Divorce; Elementary Education; *Elementary School Students; Elementary School Teachers; Family Problems; Foreign Countries; Nuclear Family; *Parents; Student Characteristics; Student Evaluation; *Teacher Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS Child Behavior Checklist; Coping Inventory

ABSTRACT

Whether specific classroom coping styles of elementary school children from divorced families differ in comparison with their peers from intact homes was studied, along with the relationship between teachers' observations of children's specific coping styles and parental reports of children's behavior problems. The divorced-family group consisted of 28 boys and 33 girls from 8 to 12 years of age in grades 3 to 6. The intact-family group was matched for grade, sex, and school district. Teacher perceptions measured through the Coping Inventory were compared with results from the Child Behavior Checklist which was completed by parents. According to teachers, children from disrupted families exhibited a more restrictive range of coping styles in comparison with peers from intact homes. Children with divorced parents were also found to exhibit more behavior problems. In general, children's coping styles when confronted with environmental stressors were found to be inversely related to their maladaptive behaviors, probably as a result of ineffective coping. One table provides descriptive statistics. (Contains 25 references.) (SLD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 368 785

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
✓ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
LINDA KURTZ
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Teacher assessments of coping styles in children of divorce

Linda Kurtz, Ph.D.

School of Psycho-Education

University of Montreal

Montreal, Quebec

Canada, H2C 1A6

Running head: CHILDREN OF DIVORCE

Paper presented at the Annual meeting of the AERA, New Orleans (April, 1994).

TM021298

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Teacher assessments of coping styles in children of divorce

It is estimated that 45 per cent of all children born since 1970 will experience an average of six childhood years in a single-parent home as a consequence of divorce (Hetherington, 1992). Seminal findings from several longitudinal studies (e.g., Block, Block, & Gjerde, 1988; Hetherington, 1989; Wallerstein, 1991) suggest that children invariably experience acute negative reactions in postdivorce adaptation; that the nature and course of adaptation to family transition vary according to individual, parental, and environmental factors; and that approximately one-third of children who have experienced the divorce process report long term psychological difficulties.

The literature is replete with evidence suggesting that a widespread behavioral change in children is likely in response to family disruption (Reid & Crisafulli, 1990). Moreover, elementary school age students from divorced families have been found to report decreased academic self-efficacy in comparison to their peers from intact homes (Kurtz & Derevensky, in press-a). These observations are consistent with numerous studies indicating that children of divorce remain at risk for difficulties in school performance and cognitive functioning by virtue of their maladaptive behavior, often in the form of externalizing and internalizing behavioral problems (e.g., Guttman, 1993; Hetherington, 1989; Shaw & Emery, 1987; Stolberg, Camplair, Currier, & Wells, 1987; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989).

Investigators have increasingly turned to stress and coping theory (Lazarus, 1966; 1991), particularly the work of Garmezy and Rutter (1983) and Rutter (1988), as a theoretical framework for this research (Hetherington, 1992; Wallerstein, 1991). According to Compas (1991), "coping mechanisms" (i.e., resources and efforts) may be

conceptualized as those intentional cognitive and behavioral responses one uses to deal with a situational stressor, such as parental divorce. Psychological coping resources include those personal characteristics which are influential when faced with a stressful life event (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Subsumed within psychological coping resources are coping styles, conceptualized as those generalized strategies an individual has progressively developed when approaching stress inducing situations. Studies have consistently demonstrated the positive influence of social support upon psychological coping resources (Wallston, Allagna, DeVellis, & DeVellis, 1983). Coping efforts include the actual behavioral or cognitive strategies employed to reduce experienced stress in a specific situation (Compas, 1987). Within the context of this model, children's behavioral problems subsequent to parental divorce may be conceptualized as the result of maladaptive strategies employed in an effort to cope with the changes in lifestyles and parent-child relationships that ensue following parental divorce. Research on adults has generally suggested that coping efforts vary as a function of coping resources (Menaghan, 1983). Although developmental research on stress and coping remains in its infancy, according to the model, coping styles play an important role in influencing children's behavioral coping outcomes. Specific knowledge of children's classroom coping styles may provide important data for the construction of teacher implemented, individualized student programs to reduce maladaptive coping patterns within the scholastic setting.

The purpose of this study is to examine whether specific classroom coping styles in elementary school children from divorced families differ in comparison to their peers from intact homes. The relationship between teachers observations of children's specific coping styles and parental reports of children's behavior problems are examined as well.

The findings will provide important data on developmental conceptualizations of coping and facilitate the development of school-based interventions that aim to modify maladaptive processes in for children of divorce, a population that remains at risk for behavior problems.

Methodology

Subjects

Divorced (D) Group. The D group consisted of 28 boys (46%) and 33 girls (54%), with an average age of 9.7 years old and a range of eight to 12 years of age (SD=1.24 years), equally distributed across grades three to six. This group had parents who were physically living apart as a result of the divorce process (i.e., legal divorce or separation culminating in marital dissolution, M=3.15 years, SD=2.7 years). All children were in sole residential custody of a nonremarried parent. Only custodial parents were requested to participate. Parents had an average of a grade 12 education. Maternal custody was in effect in 91.64 percent of the families and paternal custody was in effect in 8.36 percent of the cases. These statistics roughly correspond to the national average (Guttman, 1993). Although the preponderance of the sample was in the residential custody of the mother, visitation by the noncustodial parent was abundant in both frequency and duration of contacts, suggesting considerable paternal participation in child-rearing.

Intact (I) Group. This group (matched for grade, sex, and school district) had no history of marital separation and consisted of 28 (46%) boys and 33 (54%) girls equally distributed across grades three to six, with an age range of eight to 12 (M=9.6 years, SD=1.19 years). Parents had an average of a grade 12 education.

Measures

Coping Inventory [CI] (Zeitlin, 1985). The CI measures consistent "behavior patterns and skills that are the resources the child uses to meet personal needs and to adapt to the demands of the environment" (Zeitlin, 1985, p. 1). All 48 items describe observable behaviors that are used for coping in diverse situations. The CI consists of two subscales: Coping With Self and Coping With the Environment. These subscales are further divided into three dimensions of coping styles: 1) Productive; 2) Active; and 3) Flexible Coping Behaviors. The CI yields ratings on all the three dimensions for both subscales and a Global Adaptive Behavior Index (ABI). The rater uses a five point Likert-type scale, ranging from "not effective" to "effective most of the time". Inter-observer reliability coefficients ranging from .92 to .80 (Zeitlin, 1985). Internal consistency of both subscales, their respective three dimensions, and the ABI ranges from .84 to .98.

Child Behavior Checklist [CBCL] (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1983). The CBCL is a 118 item parent report that can be used for children aged four to 16 using a three point scale to assess children's social competence and an array of behavior problems. Total behavior problems, which control for gender and age differences, were conceptualized as the result of coping efforts of a maladaptive nature.

Family Background Survey [FBS] (Kurtz & Derevensky, in press-a). The survey provided demographic information on parents and children.

Design and Procedure

A between-groups design was employed. Following permission from four suburban school boards, all children in grades three through six in twelve elementary schools were given a package addressed to their parents containing an information letter, consent form, and the FBS. Children who were selected for the study were each given a package for their parents containing CBCL and an instructional cover letter. The homeroom

teachers were then requested to complete the CI on the 122 children selected for this study.

Results

The difference between-group centroids for the dependent variables was examined using MANOVA procedures, with family status (D and I group) entered as the independent variable. Teacher ratings of children's coping styles with typical classroom events are reported in Table 1. The vector representing coping styles, a psychological coping resource construct (as measured by the CI Self-Active, Self-Productive, Self-Flexible, Environment-Active, Environment-Productive, and Environment-Flexible subscales), was observed to be statistically significant [$F(6,115)=7.510$, $p<.001$]. Individual F-tests revealed that all six aspects of coping styles were significant and appeared to be contributors to this effect. Children from the D group were found to exhibit a more restrictive range of coping styles. A significant predictive relationship between children's age and the CI Adaptive Behavior Index was observed for the D group only [$F(3,57)=4.42$, $p<.05$]. The D group also exhibited more behavior problems [$t(120)= 3.53$, $p<.001$].

Multiple regression models were employed to examine how children's maladaptive behavior varies as a function of their coping styles. More specifically, two sets of independent variables that represented children's internal and external coping styles (i.e., the three subscales of the CI pertaining to the self and the three subscales of the CI pertaining to the environment, respectively) were entered into the model. The F-test for the set of external CI independent variables was observed to be significant when predicting the CBCL [$F(3, 118)=2.83$, $p<.05$] for the aggregate sample. All three dimensions (environment-flexible, environment-active, environment-productive)

appeared to be equal contributors to this effect, indicating a inverse relationship between teachers' observations children's coping styles with environmental stressors and parental perceptions of children's maladaptive coping behaviors, regardless of family configuration.

Discussion

According to teacher reports, children from disrupted families exhibited a more restrictive range of coping styles in comparison to their peers from nondivorced homes. As expected, they were found to be more nonproductive, rigid, and passive upon coping with the environment (i.e., manage opportunities, challenges, frustrations, and threats in the environment) and coping with the self (i.e., manage one's relationship to the environment in order to prevent vulnerability) in comparison to their peers from nondivorced families. Interestingly, children with divorced parents were found to exhibit a higher level of behavior problems. Hence, these data suggest that children from disrupted homes typically draw upon a limited range of styles to cope with stressors that are encountered on a daily basis. As such, they remain at risk for developmental disruption by virtue of the means in which they habitually manage the world. These results are interesting in light of the fact that the literature suggests that adaptive individuals make use of the full spectrum of coping styles and that prolonged use of one particular pattern may hamper psychological development (Tarabulsy & Derevensky, 1990).

In general, children's coping styles when confronted with environmental stressors were found to be inversely related to their maladaptive behaviors, likely as a result of ineffective coping. More specifically, children were observed to have restrictive pattern of coping styles with environmental stressors were more likely to demonstrate

behavior problems within the classroom context. Interestingly, this finding applied to all children, regardless of family configuration. More specifically, the use of nonproductive, rigid, and passive coping styles to manage one's relationship with the environment was found to be associated with problem behavior according to teachers' reports.

A significant predictive relationship between children's age and the Global Adaptive Behavior Index was observed for the divorced group only. The nature of this relationship indicated that older students from divorced families were more likely to exhibit a more limited range of styles to cope with stressors that are encountered on a daily basis. Prepubertal children have been found to exhibit better postdivorce adaptation, with the onset of puberty raising the risk of maladaptation (Hetherington, 1992). Perhaps the concomitants of the divorce process present children with comparatively greater challenges as they get older, while confronted with diminished psycho-social coping resources and the physical absence of one parent. Moreover, these children are often confronted with increased demands to grow up faster (Elkind, 1981) and assume more domestic responsibility (Kurtz & Derevensky, in press-b) than their peers from intact families. As a result, generally maladaptive tendencies are more likely to develop from postdivorce experiences with managing negative stress.

The Coping Inventory (Zeitlin, 1985) generates a specific profile on children's maladaptive behavior patterns. As such, it facilitates the construction of objectives for school-based counselling interventions directed at the modification of maladaptive processes in students. The nature of this instrument renders an objective and detailed description of children's interactions with their environment, thus promoting interventive efforts in an IEP that are specific to the individual child's needs.

References

Achenbach, T. M., & Edelbrock, C. S. (1983). Manual for the child behavior checklist and revised child behavior profile. Burlington, Vermont: Dept. of Psychiatry at the University of Vermont.

Block, J. H., Block, J., & Gjerde, P. F. (1988). Parental functioning and the home environment in families of divorce: Prospective and concurrent analysis. Journal of American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 27(2), 207-213.

Compas, B. E. (1987). Coping with stress during childhood and adolescence. Psychological Bulletin, 101, 393-403.

Compas, B. E. (1991). Perceived control and coping with stress: A developmental perspective. Journal of Social Issues, 47(4), 23-34.

Elkind, D. (1981). The hurried child: Growing up too fast, too soon. MA: Addison-Wesley.

Garmezy, N., & Rutter, M. (1983). Stress, coping, and development in children. NY: McGraw-Hill.

Guttman, J. (1993). Divorce in psycho-social perspective: Theory and research. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Hetherington, E. M. (1989). Coping with family transition: Winners, losers, and survivors. Child Development, 60(1), 1-14.

Hetherington, E. M. (1992). Coping with marital transitions: A family systems perspective. Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development, 57(2-3), 1-14.

Kurtz, L., & Derevensky, J. L. (in press-a). The effects of divorce on perceived self-efficacy and behavioral control in elementary school children. Journal of Divorce and Remarriage, 20.

Kurtz, L., & Derevensky, J. L. (in press-b). Family configuration and maternal employment: Effects upon family environment and children's outcomes. Journal of Divorce and Remarriage, 21.

Lazarus, R. S. (1966). Psychological stress and the coping process. NY: McGraw-Hill.

Lazarus, R. S. (1991). Emotion and adaptation. NY: Oxford University Press.

Lazarus, R. S., & Folkman, S. (1984). Stress, appraisal, and coping. NY: Springer.

Lindner, M. S., Stanley Hagan, M., & Cavanaugh Brown, J. (1992). The adjustment of children in nondivorced, divorced single-mother, and remarried families. Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development, 57(2-3), 35-72.

Menaghan, E. G. (1983). Individual coping efforts: Moderators of the relationship between life stress and mental health outcomes. Marriage and Family Review, 6(1,2), 113-135.

Reid, W. J., & Crisafulli, A. (1990). Marital discord and child behavior problems: A meta-analysis. Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology, 18(1), 105-117.

Rutter, M. (1988). Studies of psychosocial risk: Power of longitudinal data. NY: Cambridge University Press.

Shaw, D. S., & Emery, R. E. (1987). Parental conflict and other correlates of the adjustment of school age children whose parents have separated. Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology, 15(2), 269-281.

Stolberg, A. L., Camplair, C., Currier, K., & Wells, M. J. (1987). Individual, familial, and environmental determinants of children's postdivorce adjustment and maladjustment. Journal of Divorce, 11(1), 51-70.

Tarabulsy, G. M., & Derevensky, J. L. (1990). Coping mechanisms and children from divorced parents. In S. Dansereau, B. Terrisse, & J. M. Bouchard (Eds.), Education

familiale et intervention précoce [Family education and early intervention] (pp.116-126). Montreal: Editions Arc.

Wallerstein, J. S. (1991). The long-term effects of divorce on children: A review. Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 30(3), 349-360.

Wallerstein, J. S., & Blakeslee, S. (1989). Second chances. Men, women, & children a decade after divorce: Who wins, who loses - and why. NY: Ticknor & Fields.

Wallston, B., Allagna, S., DeVellis, B., & DeVellis, R. F. (1983). Social support and physical health. Health Psychology, 2(4), 367-391.

Zeitlin, S. (1985). Coping inventory: A measure of adaptive behavior. Bensenville, IL: Scholastic Testing Service.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of teacher-rated coping styles in children from families with divorced parents and children from intact families.

Group (n) Variable	Divorced Mean	(n=61) S.D.	Intact Mean	(n=61) S.D.
CI Adapt. Beh. Index	162.25	47.34	204.67	29.57
CI Self-Active***	19.95	5.70	24.75	4.55
CI Self-Productive***	40.53	11.68	50.85	8.23
CI Self-Flexible***	20.26	6.09	25.05	4.38
CI Env.-Active***	19.80	6.29	26.34	4.27
CI Env.-Productive***	43.33	11.58	53.08	7.27
CI Env.-Flexible**	20.36	5.79	25.41	4.06

Note[1]. CI = Coping Inventory (Zeitlin, 1985)
(Adaptive Behavior Index; Coping with Self-Active; Coping with Self-Productive; Coping with Self-Flexible; Coping with Environment-Active; Coping with Environment-Productive; and Coping with Environment-Flexible subscales)

Note[2]. *denotes p<.05; **denotes p<.01; ***denotes p<.001

END

U.S. Dept. of Education

Office of Educational
Research and Improvement (OERI)

ERIC

Date Filmed
August 25, 1994